

Reti, Saperi, Linguaggi

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The relationship between the cognitive sciences and the sciences of language constitutes one of the crucial points in the contemporary debate on the crisis of the nature versus culture dichotomy. The linguistic disciplines, contrary to many other disciplines within the humanities, have always been aware of the fact that their object of study is a construct in which both history and nature are inextricably linked. It is not by chance, in fact, that both historical and natural are used to define language. At the same time, however, this intrinsic awareness has always clashed with the dualism of the corporeality of the signifier and the mentalism of semantic representation. This too, has always been implicit in the history of linguistic ideas. The philosophically dualistic structure of the sciences of language has, as a result, prevented them from theoretically breaking into the paradigm of the present-day cognitive sciences, of which, among other things, they have been historically a part of, from their very inception.

The naturalistic turn, that in the last two decades has forcefully manifested itself within the new paradigm of the cognitive sciences, would in fact, allow for the healing of this old and profound fracture to take place, re-launching a sort of monistic centrality of language, capable of re-defining the idea of the consciousness of the human animal as species-specific awareness of mental representation. That is, the recognition of a multiplicity of information of the most heterogeneous physical and electrophysiological kinds, concentrated in a conceptual unity provided with a cognitive propositional format typical of human beings.

"Species-specificity" is the key term necessary to our attempts to understand the controversial relationship between the sciences of nature and the very nature of human language. The way this term has been used by philosophers, linguists, anthropologists or others in the disciplines of the Humanities, tends to underline that certain behaviors, functions or capacities are the exclusive of a given species. The case of language is certainly the most often cited. According to many researchers, in fact, man distinguishes himself from all other primates due to his capacities to categorize and abstract, to individuate phenomenal causality, practice intentionality and recognize his conspecifics as intentional mental agents (just like himself) (Tomasello, 1999, p. 32), understand the semantic and syntactic structures of language, use them creatively (Chomsky), and build artifacts and technology (Leroi-Gourhan). All these being capacities that are in one way or another, then traced back to linguistic representation.

Until the establishment of the cognitive sciences, and certainly until the second half of the 19th century – epistemologically dominated by the paradigm of the "linguistic turn" – this conviction was, nevertheless, encapsulated in a strongly anti-naturalistic and anthropocentric vision that united linguistic philosophies, that in other aspects, were in direct contrast, such as formal analytical logic,

structuralism and generativism. What they all shared was a "disembodied" vision of the processes of codification, elaboration, production and comprehension of language. The specificity of the latter, in this context, was completely attributed to the autonomous potentiality of a type of formal intelligence that was "infinitely creative" and "independent of context" (Chomsky), "omniformative", capable of "self-referentiality" (Tarski), "semiotically omnipotent" (Prieto, De Mauro). This unlimited liberty that language was said to enjoy along with its capacity to generate infinite universes of representation, was not only considered something that regarded only human beings, but little by little assumed the role of being the pervasive metaphor of cognitive activity itself. This conviction becoming so deeply-rooted as to have generated a cascade of cognitive blindness effects that are the involuntary corollaries of an anthropocentric original sin.

The first, and most invasive, is the idea according to which an activity is "cognitive" only when it is "representational". The distinction made in philosophy between "thinking" and "representing the world to oneself" has been passed down throughout the centuries and has made its way into all areas of knowledge. Those who are more sensitive to a naturalistic ethic, try to at the least to silence their sense of guilt with respect to the rest of the animal kingdom, and at best, arrive at suggesting the idea that: "in any case, every species disposes of its own way of representing the world". What really seems to be impossible to admit is that cognitive worlds might exist that are totally deprived of representational activity, that life can be lived in an adaptive and adequate manner without any type of word, thought, concept, idea, meaning, sign or referential system. Basically, that is, without any type of translation of information into mental labels.

The second type of cognitive blindness – derived from the first and maybe even more ancient in the history of ideas – is the conviction, according to which it is linguistic representation itself that determines the cognitive superiority of the human animal in respects to the rest of the animal kingdom. Completely allergic to reflecting on the anomalous, and in certain aspects artificial way, in which the flow of vital information is categorized through the neat placing of any natural or cultural object, through the mesh of our extremely complex net of our lexis, the linguistic thinking of the 19th century converted and made into an art, what Vico called "the first defect of the human mind" (the naming of intangible reality), into a philosophical shortcut, recycling the age old thesis of the dualistic alterity of human thought. The idea of a different substance between signifié and significant, competence e performance, between "matter of the mind" and representational activity that permits the extraction of vaporous entities without "weight", and with which we communicate and reason has constituted, the principle barrier that separates, to this day, the experimental method from that of pure speculative activity.

Lastly, a third type of cognitive blindness exists that is by far more refined and scientifically well informed. It is the idea, widely present in not only philosophical circles,

but in many other areas of scientific culture as well, that sustains, that it is to linguistic representation that we owe the evolutionary processes that have characterized the natural selection of the sapiens. This thesis, is generally accompanied by the naturalistic version of dualism that we have previously discussed and that, in this case, manifests itself under the form of a fracture between “natural evolution” and “cultural evolution”, or to use an older expression, between “nature” and “culture”. The general proof exhibited by this dichotomy consists in the different chronology between the two histories, characterized by the extremely slow transformations of the first case, and the amazing speed in the flow of events of the second. In this singular thesis, we see cultural processes assimilated to linguistic ones and the velocity of human selection to that of the course of the history of cultural evolution.

The new series of this journal - Reti, saperi, linguaggi, as of today available online thanks to the editor CoRiSCO – is born with the idea of giving back “the gift of sight” to these and other types of cognitive blindness, and to those working in the field of the cognitive sciences of language from a cognitive perspective.

Even if we consider the use of language and its symbolic projections to be unrenounceable and central to human cognitive processes, as is the study of language in theories of cognition, we nonetheless believe:

That representations can exist without linguistic form, or even result to be completely absent from many human activities and/or those forms of life different from that of the human animal;

That language itself does not constitute neither a form of privileged conceptual uniqueness nor let alone, a guarantee in order to maintain the processes of adaptive selection in those that use it as a means of communication and for the construction of logical and semantic universes;

That any attempt whatsoever to explain linguistic evolution as a byproduct of cultural and/or natural evolution is only a nominalist shortcut that does not understand the phenomenological irreducibility of the unitary nature-culture circle, as Cavalli-Sforza reminds us when he says: «we can say that culture is a biological mechanism, in that it depends on organs, such as hands to make instruments, a larynx to speak, ears to hear, the brain to understand, etc., that allow us to communicate, invent and build new machines able to exercise new useful and special functions, of doing all that is necessary, desirable and possible» (Cavalli-Sforza 2004: 780).

The possibility itself of constituting a new role for the cognitive sciences of language is based, in our view, on these three premises that we consider the principal research directions to which this journal is dedicated.

On one hand, then, going beyond the specific reflection on the theories and practices of linguistic cognition, it gathers contributions on all the possible forms of communicative thought, symbolic and cultural, regardless of its format and/or structure of mental representation involved in its generation. On the other, it hosts essays and papers on adaptive individual and social behaviors, functionally and structurally compared in their perceptive, communi-

cative, categorical and cognitive processes on the basis of their selective outcomes and success.

The philosophy of language and of the mind, cognitive applications of artificial intelligence, the ethology of communicative and cultural systems, ethics and comparative psychology, evolutionary perspectives applied to all the branches of humanistic-social reflection, bio-linguistic and neuroscientific foundations of cognitive activities, including the symbolic projections of neuroethics and neuroaesthetics, up to the reflections on the cognitive approaches of the social sciences as well as those concerning bio-politics, these all constitute the areas and contents that will be covered in the new series of the journal. These are all perspectives that can be approached and developed from theoretical-philosophical standpoints as well as strictly experimental ones; with approaches oriented to the accumulation and progressive stratification of data and information as well as to the critical revision or confutation of general and/or specific hypotheses; with a theoretical-applicative style, or with a historic –reconstructive one.

Reti, saperi, linguaggi, (networks, knowledge, and languages), in short, that intertwine in the background of the discipline of the cognitive sciences but also in that of their sharp, critical and contextualized reasoning, under the conviction that no scholastically stereotyped and purely repetitive interpretation can bring us to a real advancement in scientific research in general, and least of all, in the cognitive sciences of language.

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